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Blindfolded Commitment

The Carter administration has left us no choice but to conclude that its political commitment to a new strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union is such that the White House is now prepared to ignore or discount alarming new evidence that the prospective agreement may be fatally flawed.

Consider two recent developments. A current U.S. intelligence study concluded that the Soviet Union probably possesses 1,000 more intercontinental ballistic missiles than are counted under either the SALT I agreement now in effect or the SALT II treaty reportedly close to completion. And Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has admitted in closed testimony that loss of the two electronic listening posts in Iran will compromise this country's ability to verify Soviet compliance with SALT II terms until 1984, one year before the treaty would expire.

These disclosures are likely to deal a devastating setback to the administration's case for SALT. Yet the President's SALT spokesmen blithely discount the secret stockpile of Soviet missiles as of "little military significance." And, notwithstanding Adm. Turner's reluctant, damaging admission, the administration continues to insist publicly — as Secretary of Defense Harold Brown did Tuesday — that U.S.

verification capabilities are sufficient to detect Soviet cheating on either SALT I or SALT II.

Only political considerations could explain such untenable interpretations in the face of the countervailing evidence.

The Carter administration's cavalier willingness to dismiss a hidden arsenal of 1,000 Soviet ICBMs is mind boggling. This reserve force would give Moscow at least 2,600 ICBMs to fewer than 1,100 for the United States. If these reserve missiles are "militarily insignificant," why would the Soviets build them?

Granted, SALT I and SALT II limit only fixed missile launchers, not the missiles themselves. So, technically, additional missiles are not violations of any existing or prospective arms agreement.

But it is also true that about 350 of the Soviet Union's 1,600 missile-launching silos are equipped to withstand the heat and blast of a launching and can thus be reloaded with new missiles in a matter of hours. Beyond the doubled threat posed by reloadable silos, can the Carter administration afford to ignore the possibility — indeed, the probability — that the Soviets could launch prepositioned, reserve ICBMs from concrete pads or from mobile launchers whose existence could be easily concealed?

In truth, a secret and uncounted arsenal of Soviet ICBMs

could, in a sudden crisis, be quickly deployed with devastating effect on the Soviet-American strategic balance. It would then, of course, be too late to bemoan the yawning gaps in SALT II that permitted the Soviets, legally, to obtain a crushing strategic superiority.

Yet, by the administration's own admission, there is nothing in SALT II that would ban reloadable silos or limit the numbers of strategic missiles the Soviets could build. As we said, it boggles the mind.

As for verification, the revelation that the Soviets possess a concealed stockpile of ICBMs dramatically underscores the dangers inherent in anything less than foolproof safeguards against SALT cheating.

The loss of the listening posts in Iran crippled the critically important monitoring of Soviet missile tests and development. Without this monitoring, there is no way to know, among other things, whether the Russians are packing more warheads into their missiles than would be permitted under SALT II.

These disturbing disclosures are only the most recent in a series of developments that are rapidly eroding the case for SALT II despite the administration's desperate, and at times disingenuous, defense of the prospective treaty.